AMERICANA

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Chicago Hot Dog Stands
[can you come up with a more evocative title?]

For many people in the United States, “hot dog” means a packaged product sold at food retailers or the kind of roller-grilled sausagess found in convenience stores and interstate fueling stations. All too often, the words “hot dog” evoke the memory of overly charred sausages at summer picnics. But not in Chicago, where hot dogs and the places that serve them are central both to the city’s food culture and to the identity of the inhabitants and the neighborhoods in which they live.

A couple of years ago a producer from *ABC Nightline* came to Chicago to do a Fourth of July story about the history of hot dogs. He had seen Patty Carroll’s photographs of Chicago’s colorful hot dog stands and wanted to take his own pictures and run interviews along with some historical narrative. We set out with a local television crew in search of some of the city’s best-known stands. As we drove through the city, observing many a hot dogerie, the inevitable discussion began about which hot dog stand is best and what the "real" way to eat this satisfying food is. One cameraman said that a place in his old neighborhood on the "Nort Side" had been the best. "Where’s that at?" asked another, adding, "You know Gene and Jude’s,

over by River Road? We always go there." The first acknowledged that the old “Nort Side” place was no longer so good since it had changed ownership. As the conversation continued, it revealed what long-time residents of the Windy City have always known: that one’s favorite hot dog stand is always located in one’s most familiar haunts.

The out-of-town producer was surprised at the firmness with which the locals expressed their opinions. "Aren’t all Chicago-style hot dogs the same?" he asked. “No!” came the answer. They are not the same everywhere. Some stands make them better than others. And the atmosphere of the stands really varies.

Garden on a Bun

Nevertheless, there is a canonical Chicago hot dog: the "garden on a bun," or "dragged through a garden." To make it, the sausage is heated in a hot-water bath, placed in a bun (which is usually made with poppy seeds), slathered with mustard, and covered with an iridescent, slightly sweet, green relish and chopped onions. Sour pickle slices and sliced tomatoes are slipped in next to the hot dog along with several mildly hot whole "sport" peppers [what are “sport” peppers?]. A sprinkling of celery salt is optional. French fries are the usual accompaniment, often wrapped with the finished hot dog in waxed paper so that the flavors and textures slightly converge.

Chicagoans are true hot dog connoisseurs. Aficionados of the local hot dogs know that the sausage must be prepared so that it has a "bite" or a "snap" to it. They also have distinct opinions about what should adorn the hot dog. The local TV crew was aghast when someone from *Nightline* suggested putting ketchup on a hot dog: this is anathema, in an almost religious sense. One crew member noted sadly that young people who have been raised on supermarket hot dogs and subjected to the major fast-food outlets now put ketchup on hot dogs. Our cherished traditions are being washed away in a red tide, he complained.

Discrimination in taste exists for hot dogs as surely as it does for any of the world's haute cuisines. But the key to understanding the tradition of the Chicago hot dog lies in the proposition that *place* -- in both its geographic and temporal senses – is likely as important as the product itself. Chicago's many stands, perhaps three thousand or more, are embedded in the city's rich cultural fabric.

A Little History

How did a sausage become a symbol of urban life? The history of the hot dog is intertwined with Chicago's growth as a great immigrant city in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The hot dog as we know it descends from two great sausage traditions, the German and the Eastern European. Although German

speakers had long been present in the United States, immigration from Germany and the Hapsburg Empire increased in 1848 and remained high into the twentieth century. Like neighboring Milwaukee, Chicago was substantially a German (and Scandinavian and Irish) town after the Civil War. With the newer groups of immigrants came beer gardens and a favorite food, sausages. Starting in the 1860s, sausages were sold cheaply in beer gardens and halls and from portable stands or pushcarts at public events, just as they would have been in a German city. By the turn of the twentieth century, Eastearn European Jews, Poles, Czechs, Bulgarians, Russians, and many other Slavic speakers, as well as Italians and Greeks, flooded into the city, reinventing the tradition of selling, buying, and eating sausages. The pattern was set for the hot dog's preeminence in American culture: food for public consumption, cheap and available to all.

Perhaps as early as 1856, a Jewish butcher named David Berg opened a shop on South Wells Street; he and his descendants became the makers of one of Chicago's premier all-beef hot dogs. Parallel events were occurring in New York. In 1871 Charles Feltman, a German immigrant, opened a stand at Coney Island, where sausages were served with rolls and sauerkraut. The sausage may have been placed in the roll or eaten along with it. German and Austrian practice is generally the latter, but in the United States, beginning in the early

nineteenth century, the sandwich was the king of quickly eaten fare. And so it was that the new "hot dog sandwich" (a term still used within the industry) came into being.

Hot dogs also bear older sausage names. Among the varieties German butchers made were frankfurters and wieners. (Wieners were originally called “Wienerwurst” or “Vienna Sausages.”) Frankfurters contain beef, or are all-beef; they are spicier, heavier, and often somewhat more coarsely ground than wieners. Vienna sausages are finer, longer, emulsion-made sausages with at least 30 percent veal. So popular were these two types that other sausages were loosely called “franks” or “wieners.” Polish or Maxwell Street Polish hot dogs, invented by Macedonian immigrants, contain a mixture of meats. [which ones? Beef? Pork? Veal?] But the immense Jewish migration to America’s cities, New York and Chicago chief among them, made the all-beef frankfurter *the* hot dog of preference.

The American version of the wiener has two likely origins. One is that the actual sausage was made, Viennese style, in the 1880s and 1890s by such German manufacturers as Oscar Mayer in Chicago and Frederick Usinger in Milwaukee. (Usinger’s company still makes these sausages today, in the same smokepits.) The other is that Vienna was generally associated with haute cuisine, especially among immigrants from the imperial Hapsburg lands of Eastern Europe. When Emil Reichel and Samuel Ladanyi, both Jewish, and the latter a

Hungarian, founded a meat processing plant in 1894-1895, they called it the Vienna Sausage Company. (It is now called the Vienna Beef Company.) This designation may have been an attempt to give their products a gloss of high culture in a city that recognized the cultural status of Vienna. Vienna Sausage Company hot dogs, initially sold by

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[1] The mythic tale of how hot dogs were named has been widely circulated: On an April day in 1901 Harry M. Stevens, the concessionaire at the Polo Grounds, home of the New York Giants baseball team, decided to sell "Dachshund" sausages from portable hot-water tanks. The hawkers are said to have cried out that the "Dachshund" sausages were red hot. In those days newspapers employed sports cartoonists. T.A.D."Tad" Dorgan, of the *New York Journal*, was working in the press box that day. He drew a picture of barking dachshunds nestled in hot buns and labeled them "hot dogs." The cartoon is said to have been widely reprinted, and the rest is history. This is, of course, a myth created by Stevens and his friends in the baseball and sports-writing world. No copy of that alleged first cartoon has been found, though Dorgan's later cartoons are well known. In reality, the phrase "hot dog" appeared in American slang in the 1890s. Barry Popik and David Shulman have discovered the term in Yale and Princeton University magazines of that time, where a sausage wagon called "The Kennel Club" was referred to in 1894-1895, and the word "hot dog" was used in the latter year. "Hot dog"

street vendors, are still being sold today; in fact, the Vienna Beef Company, presently in its fifth generation of family ownership, dominates the Chicago hot dog market. Vienna's all-beef hot dogs are called frankfurters, because that is what the term implies: a beef sausage. On the other hand, the Oscar Mayer Company, whose founders were Bavarian Catholics, stopped calling its main line of sausages "frankfurters" earlier [early?] in the twentieth century, opting instead for the more accurate name "wieners." (Oscar Mayer does, however, make all-beef frankfurters, and its main product in the early years was the larger, thicker Thuringer sausage.) American

popular culture would later lump all of these various sausages together under the name "hot dog."[1]

The Hot Dog's Rise to Fame

The late nineteenth century was a time of social turmoil in American cities. Despite the forces that threatened to pull the social fabric apart, such as immigration and urban growth, other phenomena worked toward cohesion. The cinema, the gramophone, sensational newspapers, baseball, and food all became means of social integration and ways for the new populace to become Americanized. If the hot

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was a joke that reflected the shape of the sausage, the German butcher's Dachshund dogs, and the meat that allegedly went into the sausages. The same humor runs through the whole history of sausages and hot dogs in America. See David K. Barnhart and Allan A. Metcalf, *America in So Many Words* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999); Gerald Leonard Cohen and Barry Popik. Studies in Slang, vol. 6. Forum Anglicum, vol. 24 (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1999) [is "Studies in Slang" part of the Forum Anglicum, or are these two separate citations? The reference is unclear]; and contributions by Barry Popik at www.americandialect.org/news. [David Shulman is mentioned above but his name doesn't appear in these references – can you either supply a reference or cut his name?]

dog began as a kind of pan-European sausage, the consumption of which cut across social lines, then its descendants played the same role later, only more so. Rich and poor attended the great world's fairs and expositions, where they ate hot dogs, peanuts, and Crackerjacks. As baseball began to draw audiences from all sectors of society and attendance rose dramatically, eating a hot dog with fellow fans at the ball game became a ritual. The hot dog was fast becoming America's most democratic food.

Hot dogs were perfect for public eating. By nature "portion controlled" and easy to handle, they fulfilled the American public's appetite for meat along with a good dose of fat and salt. The meat industry quickly picked up on the rising popularity of the hot dog. Cheap sausages in most cases were by-products of butcher shops and meatpacking houses, convenient ways to use scraps and offal. Technology permitted mass processing: the first steam-powered meat choppers appeared in 1868; mixers, improved choppers, automated sausage stuffers, and linkers arrived in the 1890s; and potent grinders and mixers, which could handle larger amounts of meat, were introduced in the early twentieth century. Sausages were becoming so popular that in the late 1880s companies like John Morrell in Cincinnati sent hog casing to Chicago to be processed and then had the casings returned for stuffing. By the 1890s sausage companies in Chicago were importing huge quantities of sheep casings [maybe note

why huge quantities of sheep, and not hog, casings were imported? Which was more commonly used? The juxtaposition of the two is confusing]. Mass produced, inexpensive, and opportunely offered to the urban mass market, the hot dog soon became one of America's most cherished foods.

The Hot Dog Stand

In Chicago, the stand is the thing to catch the imagination of the public. Stands and carts are urban phenomena descended from the European street food cultures. The term "stand" is misleading, because it implies a temporary structure, or perhaps only a counter where an item is sold. In Chicago, however, the phrase "hot dog stand" usually means a permanent establishment, even though the stands often originated as temporary affairs, even pushcarts. This genesis can be seen in their design: a box with a service window and perhaps a small counter. Hot dog stands soon became established fixtures of the Chicago landscape.

In contrast to Chicago, New York has very few permanent hot dog stands; it is, instead, home to some five thousand pushcarts. The difference between Chicago's stands and New York City's pushcarts lies in the city ordinances. A New York City commission in 1904 found the food prepared by their pushcart vendors to be wholesome. In Chicago, however, by 1902 vendors of prepared foods and other

goods were under attack by Loop merchants as common nuisances and non-tax-paying competition. By 1906 food sold from pushcarts was declared unsafe because it had been exposed to dried manure (from the city's main traction mechanism, the horse) and other airborne debris. So vendors moved under cover, using the same cooking technology they had used with the old carts. Hot dog stands grew in number in Chicago between World War I and the Great Depression. In those hard times, the stand, like the pushcart, was an inexpensive way to begin a business and also to eat: for five cents, a diner could get a dish with all the major food groups in or on it --- the garden on a bun. It is hardly any wonder that the city’s hot dog stands came to be interwoven with the life of the city and, because they were permanent, with the memories of the people to whom they were important.

A second building surge came after World War II, when new housing spread to the edges of cities and into the suburbs. Like many veterans of the war, Morrie Berman went into business during these boom times, opening a celebrated hot dog stand called Mighty Dogs. Berman linked hot dogs to a new dining fashion, that of eating in one's automobile. Long after the decline of the drive-in and its rebirth in an altered form as the drive-through, Mighty Dogs remained true to its origins…and its justly famous French fries. Other stands followed,

each elaborating its own décor, signage, shape, and structure, each telling a story of modern life.

What distinguishes the Chicago hot dog from the wieners and frankfurters that residents had already been enjoying for decades is the “garden on a bun” style, which was probably invented by Greek, or perhaps Italian, street vendors just after World War I. These vendors appealed to the impoverished "huddled masses" who wanted, in exchange for their money, large amounts of food on their plates or in their hands. "Garden on a bun" arose by processes of negotiation in the streets and open markets. Dickering was the mode of street-level business among all ethnic groups, and so it happened that the simple hot dog became a platform for everything that the new Americans desired.

Neighborhood and Family

Chicago hot dog stands are not just places to get food; they are a means of recalling family and friends, home and neighborhood. By its signage and perseverance, the neighborhood stand represents that place where the intangibles of warm memory converge with specific taste memories. This peculiar convergence underlies the endless discussions about the qualities of hot dog stands. For those raised on the local hot dogs, biting into one evokes the past, and most fondly remembered are the stands that – in contrast to the well-scrubbed

look of the national chain restaurants-- have a dated quality about them, often a kind of grunginess, which may even enhance the flavor by adding a measure of nostalgia to the other ingredients.

Going into a stand (the “in” is important) reveals something else lying beneath the surface of mere consumption. A kind of otherworldly expression adorns many a diner’s face, an expression rarely seen among those who eat at the standard fast-food restaurants. These expressions are indicative of what Victor and Edith Turner have called a “liminal” state,[2] a place neither here nor there, where the structures of the familiar world are reversed, where the hierarchies that rule us, the constraints of society, have been removed. Stepping out of the uncertain everyday world into this liminal state reflects a project or journey, a pilgrimage or rite of passage, and it offers the possibility of creating a new *communitas*.

For many Chicagoans, this liminal place is close at hand: it is their favorite neighborhood hot dog stand. Once initiated into the fellowship of the hot dog, customers find their memory indelibly stamped. Here is the origin of the powerful attachment of Chicagoans to their hot dog stands, especially the stands with which they grew up. Here also is the reason that in the past Chicagoans

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[2] See Chapter 3, "Liminality and *Communitas*, in Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1969).

have been resistant to any other kind of hot dog, including the New York style.[3]

[3] Historically, Chicagoans will have no hot dogs other than their own served to them from stands. In the past, New York-style operators have tried to open stands in the city and have failed miserably, amid seas of red ink and open ridicule by public and press alike. It is in supermarkets that New York hot dogs have come into the market, but that is because of the marketing muscle of the major conglomerates that own such companies as Hebrew National. These hot dogs still do not appear on Chicago's streets.

Entrepreneurs

Historically, hot dog vendors have not lived in the world of large-scale food processing and marketing. Rather, they inhabit the fringe of the greater market. Vendors and stand operators descend from long lines of small merchants who occupied traditional markets. Upon arriving in the United States, they became peddlers in the town and countryside, the food cart or stand providing an entryway into the American economy.[4] Historic urban street markets, such as Chicago's Maxwell Street or New York's Lower East Side, exemplify the places in which such immigrant entrepreneurs did business on the margins of the established order of things.

The business that these merchants did and continue to do has been called "petty consumption." [by whom?] They sell small things at low cost to people at the bottom of the economic pile. In the 1930s, for instance, when times were hard for many people, hot dogs at a nickel or a dime were a way to keep body and soul together. But few individual hot dog stand owners have become rich. The average gross income of most stands in Chicago might be around $150,000.00 a

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[4] The same conclusions have been drawn about Greek immigrants in New York City in Nikoleta Katsakiori's doctoral dissertation in Sociology at the University of Manchester, UK. [has she finished it? Does it have a title?}

year. Restaurant-industry averages for net income range from 8 to 10 percent, so even at double that rate, hot dog stand profits are small. No doubt some stand owners partake of the same American mythology that has driven many: the idea of "making it" in a big way. But McDonald's Corporations do not spring from every hot dog steam table or hot-water box. By and large, "making it" means simply surviving.

There is something both hopeful and hopeless about the connection between the hot dog stand, the vendors who maintain them, and the neighborhood folk who find bliss at first bite. If you visit the well-worn urban neighborhoods that have not been subjected to gentrification, you'll find that the stands are in the same places they have been for fifty years or more, almost as aged as their environments. These businesses are so local that they are bound into their communities. Yet, often their signs are crude expressions of hope set against the backdrop of a fading urban life. The vendors await the next customer, but most know that their dreams stop here. Far from coming to grips with hard economic facts, many of the vendors exist, like their customers, in a state of liminality, a state in which desire and expectation expand and reality shrinks. The hot dog stand is an outpost of anti-modernity in a world relentlessly determined to be modern.

Vernacular Art

To aficionados, the proper preparation of a hot dog is a skill; the hot dog itself, a work of art. The places from which they are sold are works of art, too. Many hot dog joints, in their design and their décor, are forms of vernacular art that reveal cultural attitudes.

As noted above, the stand was originally a stationary version of the pushcart, which was simply a heating box on wheels. A vendor reached into the box, created the hot dog sandwich, and then reached across the cart to the customer. Even now, the simple stand is a box with a cut-out window. The vendor remains inside and pushes the product out through the window.

The street cart stands in the open, the seller hawking his product, a part of the street crowd. It is one of the oldest forms of selling and one of the roughest. The stand purveyor, by contrast, is sheltered from the crowd, almost anonymous within his dark box. Because the stand is permanently fixed, the stand owner is shielded, and his status, in these lower reaches of the economy, is consequently greater than that of the street hawker.

The barrier between seller and customer adds to a sense of ownership and pride of place, which in turn beget art. Stands are often decorated in bright colors and festooned with colorful banners; many of the banners sport red and yellow stripes. Red and yellow, now generally acknowledged to be hot dog colors, may have been

popularized by Oscar Mayer in the early 1900s. Mayer invented a machine that placed a yellow band on each hot dog to indicate its "handmade" quality. The company's early advertising campaigns told customers to "look for the brand with the yellow band."

The décor of the stands became more colorful and fanciful in the 1930s and even more so in the 1950s. Some of the figural art displayed on the SuperDawgs stand mimics well-known commercial figures; other figures are unique. Some stands have followed fashionable colors and designs -- for example, the pastels that once evoked far-off California or Florida, or the alluring, rounded chrome decor of the 1950s. Kitsch abounds: mass-produced pottery dogs with big eyes; dwarves and elves from Germanic mythology painted in pastels at Usinger's factory store in Milwaukee; Little Oscar thought up by Oscar Mayer in the late 1930s. Stands and carts are often deliberately decorated as throwbacks to an earlier era—sentimentalized retro is one of the styles of choice. The popular 1950s style recalls the old television series *Happy Days*. In some cases, it is as if the stands have been transformed into imitations of what they once were.

What began as utilitarian design, spare and to the point, evolved into fanciful decoration and then exploded into baroque artifice. The stands are often heavily, ornately decorated, and the décor of many of

them manifests a horror vacui, a desire to leave no available surface uncovered.

Carnival [I’m using the English word, as in the Bakhtin translation, ok?]

Many hot dog stands express themes reminiscent of Carnival. In traditional European societies, Carnival was a time when the ordered world was turned upside down, when social roles were reversed or abolished, when "anything goes." Carnival (from the Latin meaning "farewell to meat") occurred at the beginning of the Lenten season. It often featured frenzied displays of gross overeating and other forms of excess --what Mikhail Bakhtin has called "grotesque realism," symbolized by François Rabelais’s grotesque giant, Gargantua, and his family.[5] Bakhtin and other scholars describe Carnival, like Gargantua himself, as being politically and socially subversive of the reigning authoritarian order. The festival of Carnival celebrates the rude, the base, and the vulgar.

The décor of many hot dog stands seems similarly inspired by a wish to subvert usual social roles and categories. Although the hot dog is hardly a farewell to meat, the stands draw upon the imagery of

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[5] M. M. Bakhtin, *The World of Rabelais*, translated by H. Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969), esp. p. 19.

Carnival for their decoration, mining a rich vein of popular culture and extracting from it appealing low-brow themes. The painted and sculpted figures are often grotesque: smiling Dachshunds encased in buns; ready-to-eat, giant hot dogs dressed as Hercules and a mate with glowing eyes. Some of the representations on stands are more crude than others, but the idea is the same: hot dog stands are often places where modernity has not penetrated, where the old Carnivalesque spirit holds sway, and where formal categories of our culture are ignored. Human societies are based on the fundamental idea of domestication, of controlling the naturally wild. Carnival represents this suppressed wild side. Chicago's hot dog stands likewise celebrate the wild or natural state. They are not standardized. This is why hot dogs are "rude," and why we think of them as fun. They are.

Abundance

As one historian [who?] has noted, Americans are a people of plenty. The desire for abundance has been expressed graphically many times since our country's founding -- from Ceres, the goddess of grain and abundance, on the reverse side of coins, to depictions of cornucopia, to such patriotic songs as "America the Beautiful." Abundance is also expressed directly in food: the quality of the food may matter less than the amount (though most Chicagoans and New

Yorkers do have a refined taste for hot dogs). Here is the culinary elitist's idea of peasant fare – coarse food, and a lot of it. For many Americans of the lower economic and social orders, it is value for money that counts, more for less. And, as always in America, more meat.

Hot dog imagery is heavy on the idea of abundance. A statue of Paul Bunyan, holding a gigantic hot dog, stands before a hot dog place in a Chicago suburb. Pictures of giant hot dogs in buns "loaded with everything" are everywhere. Windows of stands, whether in strip malls or freestanding, are routinely plastered with signs. *Abondanza*! reads one. The Chicago hot dog is big, and when the primary offering is not, the operator will lay two in a bun for the hungry customer. Hot dogs, for many, mean lots of food for little money. A few years ago Oscar Mayer found that its wiener sales were lagging. The company soon hit upon a solution: stretch the product so that the rounded ends poked out of each end of a standard sized bun. Sales rose dramatically. And in Las Vegas, what better way to advertise sausage than by proclaiming, "The World's Largest Hot Dog." The message is clearly that more is always better.

But now we must return to the *Nightline* crew's question: Which, ultimately, is Chicago's best hot dog stand? The answer is that there isn't one, but many. It all depends on where the person

answering the question grew up, that person’s local roots and sensibility about how a hot dog should be cooked and served. In order to discover what hot dog stands are all about, you have to experience them for yourself.